

Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department
Strategic Plan 2022-2026



Strategic planning is a process to envision the future and develop the necessary procedures and operations to successfully accomplish the Department’s mission.

“The mission of the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department is the conservation of all species of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the people of Vermont. To accomplish this mission, the integrity, diversity, and vitality of their natural systems must be protected.”

This strategic plan identifies goals, objectives, and strategies to guide the Department in the conservation and sustainable use of Vermont’s fish and wildlife resources and convey measures of effectiveness in managing these resources. This plan will guide us for the next five years, from 2022 through 2026, and help us to effectively accomplish our mission.

Approved and adopted:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis Porter", is written over a horizontal line.

Louis Porter, Commissioner

Philosophy of the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department

We, the employees of the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department, are public servants. We act as stewards of all of Vermont's fish, wildlife, plants and the habitats and natural communities that support them. Our every power is derived from law, and our only authority is that given us by the people of Vermont. The following articles of Vermont law and the State Constitution and our mission statement frame our philosophy and constitute our vision of our mandate.

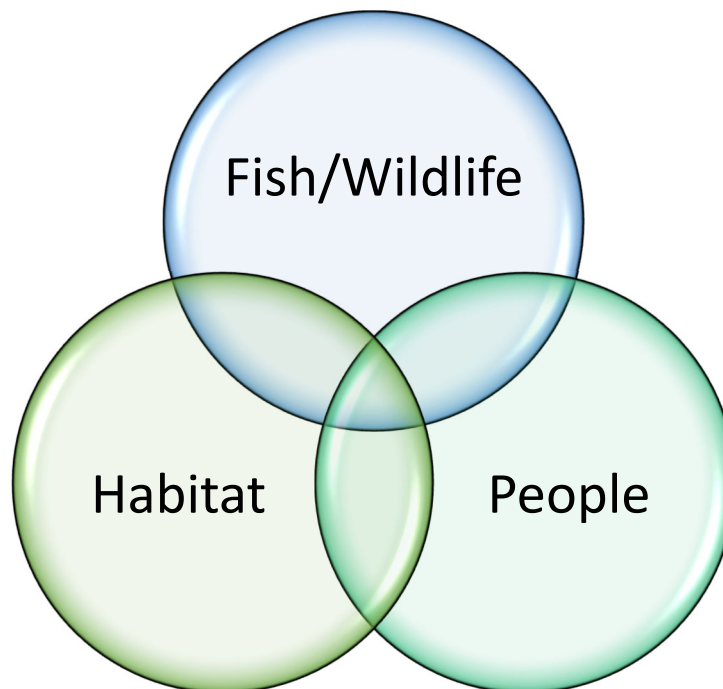
Mandates

The Fish & Wildlife Department is specifically charged with promulgating rules, through the Fish and Wildlife Board and the Commissioner, enforcing those rules and procedures, and conducting programs to achieve the following mandates:

“That all power being originally inherent in and consequently derived from the people, therefore, all officers of government, whether legislative or executive, are their trustees and servants; and at all times, in a legal way, accountable to them” (Vermont Constitution, Chapter 1, Article 6).

“The inhabitants of this State shall have liberty in seasonable times, to hunt and fowl on the lands they hold, and on other lands not enclosed, and in like manner to fish in all boatable and other waters (not private property) under proper regulations” (Vermont Constitution, Chapter 2, Article 67).

“It is the policy of the state that the protection, propagation, control, management, and conservation of the fish, game, and furbearing animals in this state is in the interest of the public welfare, and that safeguarding of these valuable resources for the people of the state requires a constant and continual vigilance” (10 V.S.A. Section 4081).



Introduction/Overview

This strategic plan charts the course for the Fish & Wildlife Department activities for the next five years. Within this plan, goals and objectives are identified to focus our actions and resources on conservation and restoration of Vermont's abundant fish and wildlife and their habitats.

This is the Department's fifth strategic plan. The original plan was developed by teams from each major Department work unit. That plan was then reviewed by the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, the public and Department staff. The organization of this plan follows the previous plans but is more consolidated in an effort to get all staff to use this as they determine program needs.

The Department's leaders take this document seriously and will make every effort to implement it. The revised strategic plan recognizes that the Department conducts many important activities to conserve and restore Vermont's abundant fish and wildlife and will face many challenges over the next five years. Biologists continue to inventory, monitor, and manage many different plants, habitats, fish, and wildlife species and natural communities. These natural resources are and will continue to be stressed by the establishment and continued spread of invasive species, disease outbreaks, habitat changes due to landscape development, climate change, and competing uses. Stressors on Vermont's natural resources are changing, and we need to continue to change with them. This revised strategic plan is responsive to these challenges, seeks to create efficiencies, and takes advantage of new opportunities to address current and emerging issues. Vermont is fortunate to have intact forests, healthy aquatic systems, and a supportive public; providing the ability to protect and conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats into the future.

In addition, our populations and user groups are a mixture of populations that bring different cultures and traditions to the Vermont outdoors. There is increasing interest and support for local sustainable food sources. Vermont's rural nature offers excellent opportunities for enjoying wildlife and nature for people of all backgrounds and experience levels. The Department's work improves the quality of life for all Vermonters.

The Department will continue to manage its 197 fishing Access Areas, numerous Streambank Management Areas, and its 100+ Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) totaling over 130,000 acres, as well as the Department's two youth Conservation Camps and five Fish Culture Stations for the people of Vermont. The development of new and better access for wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing, trapping, and boating will continue (pending budgets) as it is essential for long-term participation and enjoyment of the outdoors.



Goals, Objectives, Strategies

Goal 1. Species and Habitat Conservation, Restoration, and Management

Objective 1.1. Maintain, enhance, or restore an ecologically functional landscape throughout the state with intact and connected forest blocks, riparian areas, shrublands, grasslands, wetlands, natural communities, and aquatic habitats.

Strategy 1.1.1. Continue to develop, implement, and use Vermont Conservation Design to share the Department's scientific vision with Department staff, partners, and the public, and inform efforts to maintain or restore an ecologically functional landscape and the species that depend on it.

Strategy 1.1.2. Use land acquisition; public land management; and technical assistance and outreach to municipalities, landowners, and others as means to maintain and protect an ecologically functional landscape among public and private lands.

Strategy 1.1.3. Implement statutes, regulations (e.g., Act 250, Section 248), and policies that protect fish and wildlife habitat, and advocate for changes that enhance these protections to facilitate the Department's ability to achieve our mission.

Strategy 1.1.4. Collaborate with and support partners (e.g., NGOs, municipalities, state and federal agencies, academic institutions) to build capacity for conservation initiatives, both within Vermont and around the region.

Strategy 1.1.5. Inventory, monitor, research, and maintain data on fish and wildlife habitats and natural communities to provide baseline information for conservation efforts on public and private lands.

Example Action Items for Objective 1.1:

- Promote Vermont Conservation Design (VCD) throughout all aspects of the Department's work.
- Maintain the BioFinder website to provide access to VCD science for staff, partners, and the public.
- Continue work to reduce the rate of contiguous forest lost to fragmentation and parcellation.
- Develop and implement Long Range Management Plans for state lands using VCD and other sources of necessary and relevant information.
- Continue advancing the wetland conservation and restoration initiative in the Champlain Basin.
- Provide technical assistance to towns through the Community Wildlife Program.
- Prioritize and implement land acquisition based on conservation planning efforts, to reduce the loss of high-value areas and improve resiliency to climate change.
- Effectively engage in all relevant permitting processes (Federal, state, and municipal).
- Protect necessary wildlife habitats; rare, threatened, and endangered species; and rare and irreplaceable natural areas through the Act 250, Section 248, VT Wetland Rules, and chip harvest notification review processes.
- Continue to replace or remove structures to accommodate aquatic organism passage with US Fish and Wildlife Service, watershed groups, and others.
- Continue to advocate for forest connectivity with towns, land trusts, VTrans, and regional planning commissions for wildlife movement across the landscape.
- Find and inventory state-significant natural communities, and track occurrences in the Department's Natural Heritage Database.
- Conduct assessments of wildlife habitat, fisheries, aquatic habitats, natural communities, and interior forest blocks and connectivity blocks, as foundational information guiding management of WMAs, State Parks, and State Forests.
- Complete FWD streambank property assessment.

Objective 1.2. Conserve and restore Vermont’s fish, wildlife, and plant species to maintain ecosystem integrity in keeping with the public trust doctrine.

Strategy 1.2.1. Inventory, monitor, research, and maintain data on the abundance, diversity, and distribution of Vermont’s fish, wildlife, and plant species.

Strategy 1.2.2. Manage Vermont’s fish, wildlife, and plants to be healthy, diverse, and abundant and provide opportunities for regulated utilization.

Strategy 1.2.3. Prioritize and implement non-native (including importation) and/or invasive plant and animal inventory, control, prevention, and regulation policies and actions to protect ecosystem health and stability using best practices.

Strategy 1.2.4. Continue to implement fish and wildlife disease monitoring protocols and management systems.

Strategy 1.2.5. Consider and understand the effects of climate change and other large-scale landscape alterations on species distribution and abundance and manage fish and wildlife and their habitats for resilience.



Example Action Items for Objective 1.2

- Conduct inventory and monitoring of rare, threatened, and endangered plants and animals across the state, and track occurrences in the Department’s Natural Heritage Database.
- Develop and implement recovery plans for threatened and endangered species.
- Wildlife introductions for restoration opportunities.
- Fish stocking for restoration or to create new or to enhance existing opportunities.
- Harvest regulation development and enforcement: implementation of Big Game Plan.
- Importation permits
- Invasive plant control on state lands; private lands through Environmental Quality Incentives Program.
- Enhance and implement fish and wildlife disease and response capability and surveillance plans.
- Continue to train and organize staff to be best positioned to respond to disease and response incidents.
- Continue to work with state and federal agencies to address disease issues of regional importance.
- Maintain databases on species distribution and abundance

Goal 2. Connecting All Vermonters to Fish, Wildlife, and Nature.

Objective 2.1. Provide hunting, fishing, trapping, and foraging opportunities consistent with resource management goals and within ecological limits and encourage active participation in these activities.

Strategy 2.1.1. Develop and implement management programs (e.g., habitat protection, regulations, stocking) to ensure that sustainable resources are available and that ethical harvest techniques are employed to ensure animal welfare and preclude the wanton waste and overharvest of fish, wildlife, and plants.

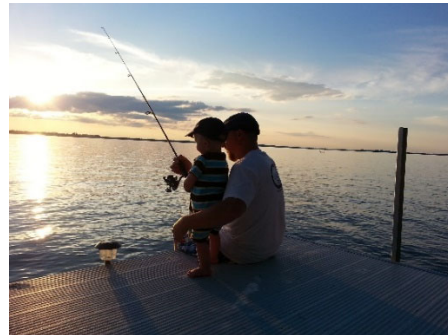
Strategy 2.1.2. Effectively engage public in developing harvest management strategies and removing barriers to participation in hunting, fishing, and trapping.

Strategy 2.1.3. Foster active participation in hunting, fishing, and trapping through instruction, collaboration, and mentorship with user groups and community partners.

Strategy 2.1.4. Improve access to public and private lands and waters for hunting, fishing, and trapping; evaluate private landowner incentive opportunities to encourage public access to private lands and waters; and improve user/landowner relationships.

Strategy 2.1.5. Capitalize on the growing interest in local foods to encourage consumptive use of wildlife, fish, and wild plants in a sustainable and responsible manner.

Strategy 2.1.6. Encourage and foster safe participation in fish and wildlife based outdoor activities.



Example Action Items for Objective 2.1

- Harvest regulation development and enforcement: implementation of Big Game Plan.
- Manage for self-sustaining fisheries, and stock fish to provide fishing opportunities only where self-sustaining populations are inadequate to provide quality fishing opportunities.
- Public hearings, surveys
- Continue programs such as Let's Go Fishing; fishing and wildlife festivals; "getting started" workshops/hunting seminars; youth licenses/hunt weekends; Master Angler Program and develop others.
- Manage and acquire Department-owned lands for public access.
- Advocate for public access on all state, federal, municipal, and private lands.
- Wild game and fish cooking seminars
- Partnerships with Rooted In Vermont and farm to table organizations.
- Provide education and outreach related to various safety concerns including rabid animals, zoonotic diseases, algae blooms, fish kills, and adverse human-wildlife encounters (vehicle collisions, crop and livestock damage, maple sugar tubing damage, bear/beaver interaction, etc.).
- Hunter Education Programs
- Lead-free hunting and fishing gear alternatives.

Objective 2.2. Provide opportunities for boating and for viewing, photographing, and enjoying fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats consistent with resource management goals while ensuring resource protection.

Strategy 2.2.1. Improve access to public and private lands and waters for wildlife-based activities while minimizing user conflicts and negative impacts on species and their habitats.

Strategy 2.2.2. Educate the public on how, when, and where to access Department-managed lands and what activities are permitted, to prevent ecological harm.

Strategy 2.2.3. Provide ADA accessible opportunities when possible and where appropriate.

Strategy 2.2.4. Continue programs on wildlife-related activities such as birding, wildlife photography, boating, and the enjoyment of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats in a manner that is ethical, safe, and consistent with protecting the welfare of fish and wildlife resources.



Example Action Items for Objective 2.2

- Diversify Access Area accessibility for all users.
- Continue to assess sites for Wildlife Viewing Platforms where appropriate and develop new structures as funding allows.
- Enhance access to Vermont’s lakes, rivers, and streams and publicize availability to users.
- Clearly communicate that hunting, angling, trapping, and wildlife observation are priority activities on Department-managed lands.
- Maintain up-to-date and user-friendly kiosks at WMA access points.
- Other Power-Driven Mobility Device Policy on state lands.
- Continue to populate Department website on watchable wildlife, backyard habitat, birding, wildlife photography, animal track identification, and feeding of wildlife.
- Dead Creek days/Herricks Cove Wildlife Festival.
- Target programs in population centers while striving for connections with all Vermonters.

Goal 3. Education and Outreach

Objective 3.1. Increase Vermonters' understanding of, and appreciation for, the land and the fish and wildlife habitat it supports.

Strategy 3.1.1. Continue to support and staff the Outreach Division's education efforts, such as Green Mountain Conservation Camp, Hunter Education, Let's Go Fishing, Project WILD, and other conservation education initiatives.

Strategy 3.1.2. Continue and expand efforts from all divisions within the Department to engage the public in conservation education opportunities.

Strategy 3.1.3. Effectively engage the public with a consistent message about the mission of the Department and emphasize a land ethic that Vermonters depend on and are connected to natural resources including wildlife and habitat as renewable resources and for their intrinsic value.

Strategy 3.1.4. Create informational materials that celebrate the diverse ways people interact with the environment.



Example Action Items for Objective 3.1

- Staff from all divisions continue to help support education program efforts by providing instruction when the opportunity exists.
- School and civic club presentations and talks
- Participate in a variety of outreach strategies to reach diverse audiences, including in-person presentations and activities, live virtual programs, video production, and podcasts.
- Working Lands
- Consistently communicate using clear, factual, and science-based information that regulated hunting, fishing, trapping are sustainable activities, can be done safely, and benefit the public.
- Explaining conservation issues, the concept of utilizing wildlife, harvest methods, the importance of wildlife habitat, endangered species, and the ecological appropriateness of various human activities.
- Continue highlighting cross over among user groups to emphasize that people can participate in a variety of wildlife activities.
- Communicate with use of clear, factual, accurate information informed by science.
- Create videos, podcasts, radio, news segments, and written materials emphasizing the ways in which the Department contributes to wildlife conservation and improves Vermonters' wellbeing.
- Continually update and provide a user-friendly website experience.
- Develop interpretive materials at Department facilities that help public connect with the resources and understand the importance of the work the Department does.

Objective 3.2. Increasing the relevancy of the Department and increase public support for the Department's mission.

Strategy 3.2.1. Expand outreach efforts to include more diverse communities.

Strategy 3.2.2. Expand outreach to landowners to engage in fish and wildlife habitat conservation practices.

Strategy 3.2.3. Continue to utilize new technologies and information outlets that are relevant to the public.

Strategy 3.2.4. Highlight the connections between the Department's work and the State's efforts, including the Vermont Climate Council, to prevent and mitigate climate change.



Example Action Items for Objective 3.2

- Identify under-represented communities in conservation programs and license sales and create authentic relationships with community leaders to help provide relevant and helpful tools to break down engagement barriers.
- Welcome wagon for new landowners.
- Continue and enhance relationship with Vermont Coverts.
- Creating videos to help landowners
- Continue providing in-person experiences with Department staff for all landowners.
- Adjust outreach methods as necessary to keep current and relevant with best practices.
- Highlight the importance of aquatic and terrestrial habitat connectivity for climate resiliency.
- Include messages in all forms of outreach that consistently highlight the necessity for habitat connectivity.

Goal 4. Diversity and Relevance

Objective 4.1. Support or increase the diversity of people who interact with or steward natural resources in Vermont.

Strategy 4.1.1. Diversify Department workforce and include an environmental justice and equity lens to the work of the Department to broaden our user groups and constituency.

Strategy 4.1.2. Provide mentoring opportunities to a broader group of communities and offer incentivized internships internally for underrepresented groups in conservation.

Strategy 4.1.3. Generate content that is relevant, appropriate, and appealing to diverse audiences and is readily available in the appropriate language.

Strategy 4.1.4. Increase presence in urban areas.

Strategy 4.1.5. Identify existing barriers impeding access to the outdoors of underserved communities and communities of color and develop strategies to overcome access barriers.

Example Action Items for Objective 4.1

- Create a paid internship program for underrepresented audiences in the wildlife conservation field.
- Continue efforts to provide mentorship opportunities, including outreach on the importance of participating in these programs, that represent diverse and historically underserved communities in VT as both mentors and mentees and advertise these opportunities following ANR's Limited English proficiency plan.
- Provide training opportunities for volunteer instructors and staff to support blind, deaf, and hard of hearing audiences.
- Develop retention strategies to foster a welcoming environment for individuals with diverse backgrounds.
- Support staff engaging with underserved communities and communities of color by providing adequate training regarding ANR's Limited English Proficiency Plan and its implementing procedures, Non-Discrimination policies, and diversity, equity, and inclusion best practices, among others.
- Continue to foster relationships with indigenous tribes and new Americans to focus content on their needs.
- Use inclusive terminology when communicating with all audiences.
- Maintain and expand relationship with Intervale Center to reach diverse communities and provide access to new programming and access to natural resources.
- Continue to create authentic relationships with organizations in urban centers and develop relevant programming opportunities.
- Create community training opportunities to educate underserved communities and communities of color about the importance of engaging with the natural world.
- Include lived experiences as an important factor when making hiring decisions.
- Participate in local events organized by or serving underserved communities.
- In coordination with ANR's Civil Rights and EJ Compliance Coordinator, operationalize environmental justice principles within the Department.
- Raise Department staff awareness about the need to provide accessible and relevant outdoor recreation for historically underserved communities.

Objective 4.2. Ensure funding for the Department that reflects the diversity of services provided to Vermonters and visitors.

Strategy 4.2.1. Increase funding/support from non-traditional constituents (user fee for WMA/Access Area, Habitat Stamp) and broad-based funding (e.g., Recovering America’s Wildlife Act or percentage of state rooms and meals sales tax).

Strategy 4.2.2. Foster genuine relationships with partnerships/organizations to increase diversity of reach to constituents.

Example Action Items for Objective 4.2

- Continue to work with state legislature and federal congressional delegation to advocate for broad based funding.
- Advocate for reimbursement for all services (e.g., warden assistance with search and rescue, regulatory reviews)
- Working with organizations that don’t focus on conservation and/or hunting, fishing, and trapping, but represent diverse communities.
- Partner with Audubon and similar organizations to foster the benefits of the habitat stamp and fish and wildlife species conservation outside of traditional constituents.



Objective 4.3. Foster respect and cooperation among diverse constituents.

Strategy 4.3.1. Develop tools to bridge disparate constituent's interests in fish and wildlife conservation and foster partnerships to better achieve our mission.

Strategy 4.3.2. Create programs to satisfy the needs of historically underserved communities and place the Department as a community resource for outdoor education and training of underserved communities.

Example Action Items for Objective 4.3

- Foster dialogue among diverse communities with differing perspectives on a land ethic to promote acceptance of the Department mission.
- Create an effective community engagement plan identifying the needs and interests of the different communities served by the Department.
- Create a database of the demographics of the communities served by the Department.



Goal 5. Operations

Objective 5.1. Operate in a cost-effective and environmentally responsible way.

Strategy 5.1.1. Continue to coordinate and communicate with intra- and interagency staff and NGOs using virtual technologies available, when possible.

Strategy 5.1.2. Maximize energy efficiency at Department-owned facilities through innovative technologies, energy efficiency, and on-site solar energy as well as purchasing vehicles utilizing the most energy efficient technology to the greatest extent possible.

Strategy 5.1.3. Continue to create efficiencies in business office operations.

Strategy 5.1.4. Consistently evaluate staff time and workflow to maintain efficiency and achieve the Department mission in accordance with the strategic plan.

Example Action Items for Objective 5.1

- Using virtual meetings and fostering telework opportunities.
- Continue to implement and expand use of renewable energy for Department buildings.
- Continue to implement and expand the use and purchase of fuel efficient and alternative energy vehicles and equipment.
- Use process improvement strategies to streamline processes.
- Use technology solutions to create efficiencies and reduce duplication.
- Maintain effective communications between managers and staff
- Develop work plans where appropriate.

Objective 5.2. Maintain safe and lawful fish and wildlife-based activities to protect species and their habitats and to limit harmful human encounters.

Strategy 5.2.1. Minimize the number of human conflicts, injuries, and fatalities that result from encounters with wildlife or participation in fish and wildlife activities.

Strategy 5.2.2. Provide education and information about the safe and ethical use of the equipment used for hunting, fishing, and trapping.

Strategy 5.2.3. Assist other state and municipal agencies in the enforcement of statutes and regulations and provide assistance to other agencies during emergencies, including search and rescue and emergency response situations.

Example Action Items for Objective 5.2

- Consumption advisories, road collisions, rabid animals, wildlife response.
- Regulations, education, management
- Continue hunter/trapper education programs, children fishing clinics, and youth Conservation Camps, ice safety, boating safety.
- Continue press releases, electronic communications, news segments and other outreach activities.
- Continue to participate Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact.
- Boating, ATV, snowmobile enforcement
- Provide support for agency wide events where Warden Service presence is helpful.

Objective 5.3. Maintain highly qualified workforce.

Strategy 5.3.1. Strengthen partnerships with universities, colleges, and organizations that work with young adults to promote internship and educational opportunities.

Strategy 5.3.2. Embrace a workplace culture founded on history, dedication to the mission, passion for conservation, and acceptance for diverse resource users.

Strategy 5.3.3. Invest in staff trainings by identifying needs and developing an annual training schedule with a focus on improving technical and leadership skills.

Strategy 5.3.4. Continue to develop career ladder for fish and wildlife staff to incentivize the continuation of professional level training and education.

Strategy 5.3.5. Improve the onboarding process and beyond to highlight opportunities for training and professional development as well as other state opportunities.

Example Action Items for Objective 5.3

- Provide paid internships, when possible, to allow a broader candidate pool.
- Develop interview questions that can be used for all new hires.
- Develop comprehensive internal staff development program.
- Continue to provide wilderness first aid for staff annually.
- Finalize and implement fish and wildlife specialist career ladder.
- Inform staff of offerings provided by state libraries to state employees.

